

Spatial Child-Friendliness in a Disadvantaged Neighborhood of Istanbul

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Abstract

A pathetic space for an adult eye, could be a paradise for children. Child-friendliness of a neighborhood is not necessarily related to the average income of its inhabitants or its fancy appearance. Any place giving chances for integration, self-mobilization, and play is spatially child-friendly. Considering these, some studies seeking for “spatial child-friendliness” are examined and an urban slum in Istanbul, Turkey called Tarlabası is observed. Its real and imaginary barriers to child-friendliness are highlighted. Taking into account of these barriers, a project is proposed, which tries to be a solution to the problems of physical and mental isolation and insecurity. Over that project, the impact of architecture and urban design on a child’s life growing up in a fragile area is questioned and discussed.

1. Introduction

This study is departed from the idea that architecture builds where we live, and that the built environment surrounding us has a very strong impact on our life and perception. The premium that architects put on the visuality of their projects, the prioritization of the aesthetical concerns in architectural education and professional practice direct the research team to make a study in order to test the role of architecture in coping with the social and physical deficiencies in the society and in the city. The belief that architectural design doesn’t have common rules to apply in every project make the research team choose an area to be a case study and make research on the power and potential of architecture for a specific area. In addition to the determination of the case study area, the concentration on a specific user group is another important input of the study.

Because focusing on the weak members of the society, such as the children, women, elderly, immigrants, disabled, etc., in design and research will increase the friendliness of the social and physical environments of people from all ages and backgrounds, the child-friendliness of the case study area is investigated. And, what an architectural project can add to or remove from the lives of the children of a neighborhood in Istanbul, Turkey called Tarlabası is researched.

To achieve the objectives of the study, firstly, the studies seeking for the positive and negative qualities of social and physical environments of urban children are dug up. It is looked for the answers to the question of what are the needs of urban environments to be child-friendly. The study results of Kevin Lynch and Louise Chawla discussing the topic from children's perspective are analyzed. Then, design projects from different scales designed and executed for the integration and self-mobilization of children are reviewed, because they constitute the references for the main output of this study, which is an urban design project.

Secondly, as the field research of the work, the inner city slum Tarlabası is reread and discussed over the diagram produced by Chawla. And the impact of architecture on a disadvantaged neighborhood's children and their life are sought for over an urban design project developed from the master's thesis study at Polytechnic of Milan written and supervised by the research team.

The study showed that it is the adult's fear and prejudice, which causes the mental isolation and imaginary barriers for child-friendliness. And secondarily, it is the physical conditions, which causes the physical isolation and real barriers. However, the built environment surrounding us has a very strong impact on our life and perception. Therefore, it is seen that reconditioning of physical environments and elimination of physical barriers are the factors as strong as the social integration projects to fight against isolation and social exclusion. With the project proposed, the changes, that might be seen to resolve the polarization and exclusion, are projected. And, the impact of physical conditions is emphasized for policy makers, teachers, and parents.

2. History, Qualities, and Case Studies of Child-friendly Environments

2.1. History of Research on Child-Friendly Environments

A lively literature on child-friendly cities has emerged in North America and in Europe in 1960's. Between 1968-1978 Kevin Lynch directed an international research and action programme called "Growing Up in Cities" funded by UNICEF and dealt with the children of low-income urban neighborhoods. His research mainly looked for the answers of two questions.

1. How do children perceive their micro-environments?
2. How do the micro-environments affect children's behaviors?

In 1980's, a significant attention started to be paid to the impact of physical environment on the social and mental development of children. In 1989, "Convention on the Rights of the Child"(UNCRC) was carried out by UNICEF. Its declaration has become the human rights agreement of the world citizens under the age of 18. In 1990's, an important shift towards a more participatory and action oriented approach was seen. In 1996, The Child-Friendly Cities Initiative was launched at Habitat II in Istanbul by UNICEF and UN-HABITAT, and the following year the first child-friendly cities meeting was held. Between 1996-1997, "Growing Up in Cities" project was re-launched by Louise Chawla's coordination and again funded by UNICEF. And from 2000's on, children's physical and mental health has emerged as a topic of significant concern. In 2004, UNICEF made the definition of Child Friendly Cities. According to this definition; the child-friendly city (CFC) is a city, a system of local governance fulfilling the rights of the children announced at the "Convention on the Rights of the Child" in 1989. These are the rights to:

- Influence decisions about their city
- Express their opinion on the city they want
- Participate in family, community and social life
- Receive basic services such as health care and education
- Drink safe water and have access to proper sanitation
- Be protected from exploitation, violence and abuse
- Walk safely in the streets on their own
- Meet friends and play

- Have green spaces for plants and animals
- Live in an unpolluted environment
- Participate in cultural and social events
- Be an equal citizen of their city

These rights respectively categorized under the titles of integration, accessibility, and well-designed urban environment from the spatial child-friendliness perspective.

2.2. Positive and Negative Qualities of Social and Physical Environments from Children's Perspective

The school is not enough by itself to prepare the young generations for the future. There should be other channels through which children and teenagers could take action and get involved.

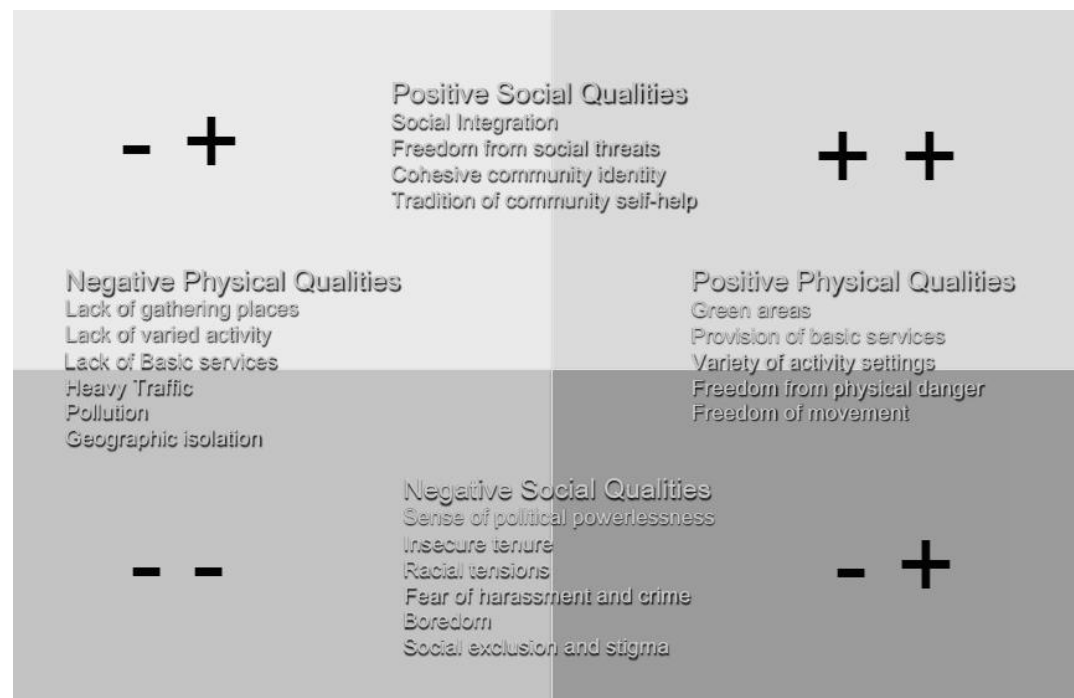


Figure 1: Indicators of Environmental Quality from Children's Perspective

For this purpose, the life outside is the best way for them to live and learn without the control of teachers and parents. Creating isolated sandboxes in some points is not the right way to think of the presence of children in the city. Parental fear and prejudices, uncontrolled busy traffic flows, neglected dangerous places are the main boundaries that prevent young citizens from freely moving through the city. The negligence, extreme precautions, real

dangers, solemnity of adulthood places result in children giving up using the city for their leisure time activities. So, the urban children suffer from the lack of integration, access, and the real urban environment. In the book of Chawla, called “Growing Up in an Urbanizing World”, the positive and negative physical and social qualities of places are categorized from children’s perspective and it is recognized and used in this study to make analysis in the field research. The positive qualities summarized by Chawla are the prerequisites and the negative qualities are the obstacles to the fulfillment of the children’s rights declared in UNCRC. Therefore, evaluating a neighborhood or a part of a city from the viewpoint, that Chawla’s diagram announces, will indicate the state of that place in terms of fulfilling the children’s rights and child-friendly environment conditions.

2.3. Child-Friendly Case Studies

Because the aim of this study is to propose a physical urban design project and question about the child-friendliness from the spatial perspective and about the

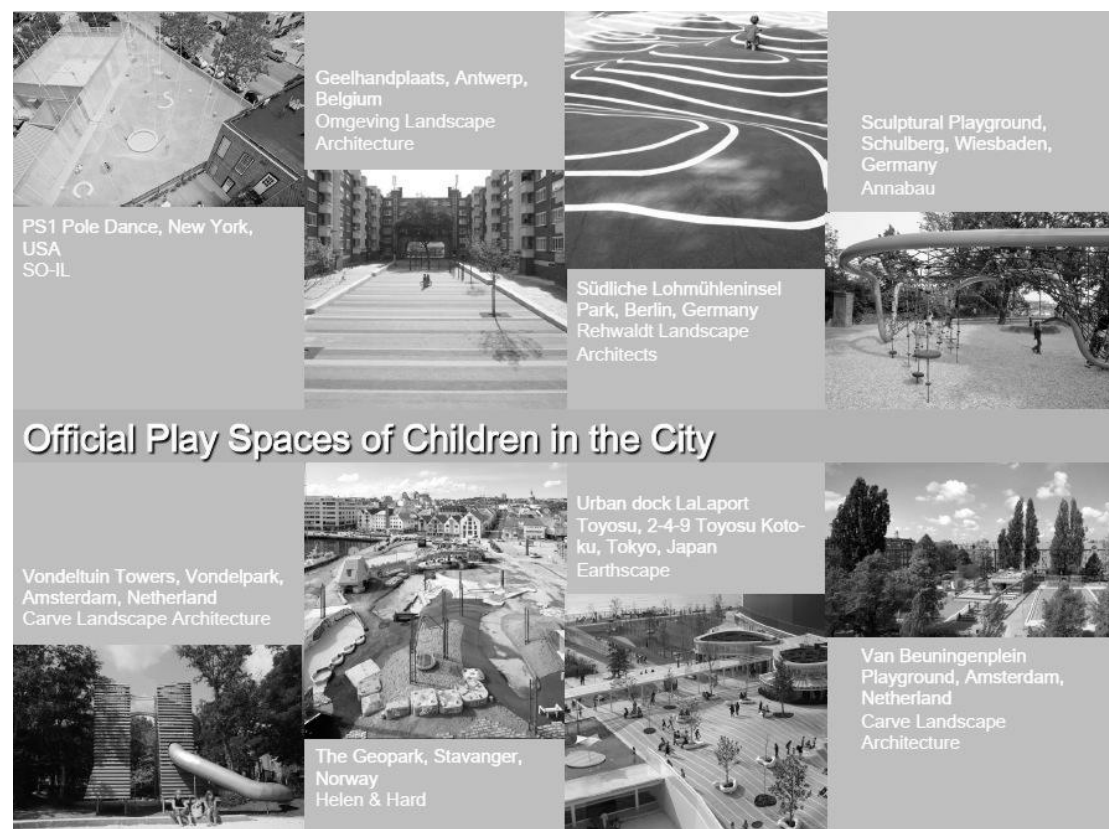


Figure 2: Some Examples of the Official Play Spaces of Children in the City

impact of physical environment on other fields, examining some works of architecture and urban design is thought valuable and essential. The case studies shown are the official places of children in the city. In other words, they are the projects specifically designed for children. Although focusing children only in some plots of the city is not enough to start to mention about the child-friendly environments, to construct a network of relationships and an accessible city starts with the correct projection of those little single projects. Therefore in this part of the paper, children's projects are brought to the table. Firstly, it is started with a couple of selected playground examples in Europe and North America. It's sometimes a rooftop or a roof of a car park, which serves as a playground. Painting the ground or installing a simple structure to climb up makes the playground enough to activate a child's imagination.



Figure 3: Some Examples of the Buildings and Building Complexes of Children

Secondly, it will be continued with the buildings and building complexes of children. There is a need in the field for buildings used actively by people of all ages. However, everybody's buildings' monotony and seriousness causes the lack of successful case studies. Therefore, it is shared in this paper the youth and

children centers and school buildings. In addition to those typologies, a homeless shelter from Germany for the temporary stay of street children and an orphanage from Thailand with its unique award-winning design are included. In the orphanage, every orphan has a house by his/ her own and their charming library is welcoming all the other kids of the city and contributes to the integration of the kids with or without parents.



Figure 4: Some Examples of Events and Design in City Scale for Children

Thirdly, it will be mentioned about the events and participatory design and study examples in city scale for children. In the examples, in one project, children paint their own neighborhood; and in another, the paths of children in the city are detected. The walking school buses projects encourage especially the parents to let their children go to school by walking. In another project, the neighborhood is mapped with children, so that the dangerous or welcoming places in the city from children's perspective are noticed.

3. An Inner Slum of Istanbul: Tarlabası and Its Children

3.1. History, and Physical and Social Qualities of the Slum

Turkey has a population of 74 million people and 13 million of this population lives in Istanbul. The county of Beyoğlu, where the urban slum Tarlabası is located, has a population of 248 thousand people. And Tarlabası's population is around 30 thousand people with its additional, roughly estimated 3 thousand unregistered inhabitants. It's the 18th C. in Tarlabası, when the first settlements of non-muslim communities have been observed. After its first settlements started to seen, Tarlabası always experienced a constant immigration process. Especially after the foundation of Republic of Turkey, the non-muslim communities left, and the muslim communities suffering from terrorist attacks, domestic violence, and unemployment from all over Turkey arrived. They came from the rural areas of Turkey, where they earn their income from agriculture and stockbreeding. So, many of them couldn't adapt to urban life in Istanbul. They couldn't find proper jobs with social security. As a result, their children started to work in the streets. The illegal trade and activities started to take place. Unfortunately, prostitution and drug dealing are still observed today in Tarlabası.

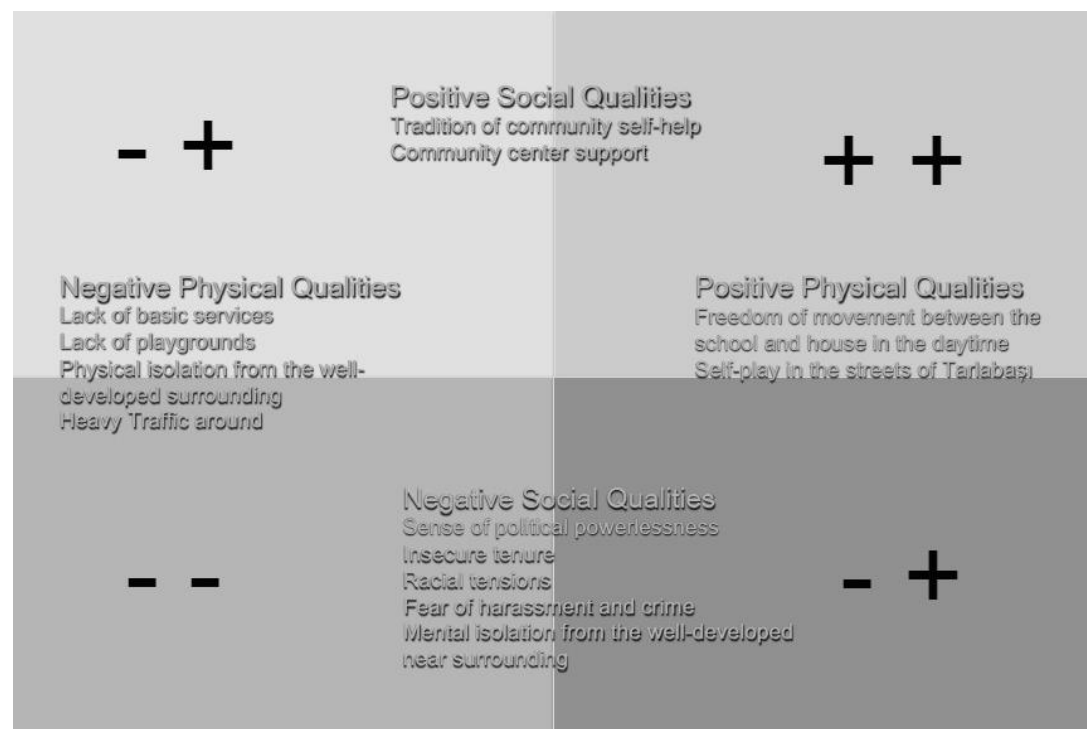


Figure 5: Indicators of Environmental Quality in Tarlabası

And now, the government, showing the high crime rate as a reason, executes an urban renewal project. So, the Tarlabası inhabitants experience a new wave of immigration currently. When it is looked at the images published in the website of Beyoğlu Municipality, which show the “new” image of Tarlabası after the completion of urban renewal project, it seems that the depressing and neglected physical environment in some parts of Tarlabası will change. This sounds very positive at first. However, almost all of the inhabitants already were or will be obliged to leave Tarlabası and sent to the outskirts of Istanbul compulsorily, where public mass housing projects were constructed for them to settle down. Instead of its old inhabitants, the high-income citizens of Istanbul will start to live and work inside the new nice apartments and fancy offices of Tarlabası, where the urban renewal project executed. The Tarlabası children obliged to go to the outskirts and their life should be also carefully studied, but it is the topic of another study. In this study, it is focused on the positive and negative social and physical qualities of Tarlabası and its children, who will continue to live in the neighborhood with their parents in the plots next to the new and charming gentrified building blocks.

The chart shown in the previous page is prepared with reference to the Chawla’s chart. It’s the analysis of the positive and negative qualities of the social and physical environment in Tarlabası. Tarlabası, the inner slum, is located in Istanbul next to a very touristic and well-developed zone. But unfortunately, this couldn’t be counted as a positive physical quality of the slum, because Tarlabası has a physical and mental isolation from this well-developed near surrounding. The prejudices, discrimination, and heavy traffic around Tarlabası result in this isolation. And this situation is stated in the chart as a negative social quality of the area. In addition to that, as it is seen in the chart, a positive social quality of Tarlabası is reflected as the community center. However the community center, where the Tarlabası children and women go to attend some courses to learn how to write and read and to do homework, moved to a smaller place; because they cannot afford their expenses anymore. So Tarlabası becomes a slum, which cannot convert its unique potential into its positive qualities, and which experiences the decay of its unique positive qualities.

As an ultimate output of this paper, it is shared an urban design project, which is a part of the master's thesis written and supervised by the research team. There could be many possible solutions to the different problems of Tarlabası and its children. However in this study, it is picked up and given one answer between several answers to the question of “Is there something that architecture can do for Tarlabası's children? ” and prepared a project called “Converting the Boulevard into an Urban Corridor and a Mixed Use Zone”.

3.2. An Urban Design Project as a Solution to Disintegration

There is physical and mental isolation of Tarlabası from its near surrounding with full of cultural and sports facilities. The boulevard functions as a borderline between bad and good here and became the core of disintegration and inaccessibility. Therefore, it is wanted to focus on it in the project. It is sought for the traces of the past. It was 1986, when the buildings were demolished to construct the boulevard there. Back then, the disintegration and the alienation between the two sides of boulevard grew up.

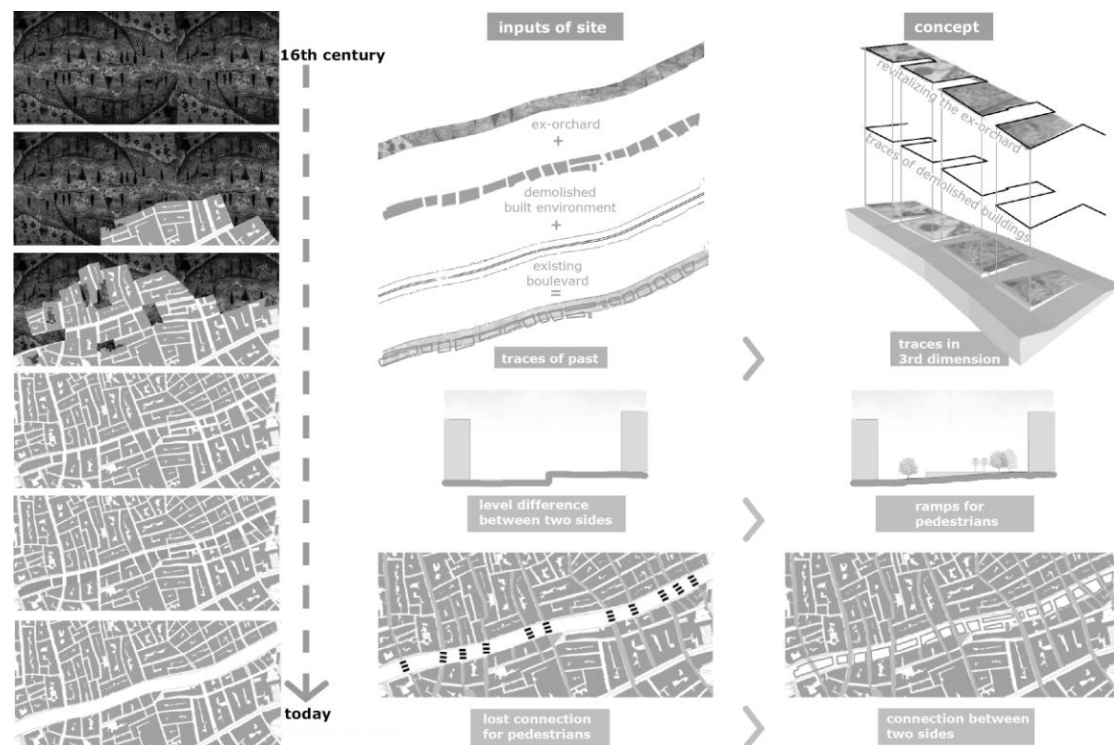


Figure 6: Main Decisions of the Project

In order to solve the disintegration and accessibility problems, the traces of past is used. The traces of the demolished buildings became the guideline of the

project, because they were re-connecting the two sides by allowing the narrow streets link again with each other and proposing a strong physical connection. It is proposed playgrounds, ateliers, and also nightclubs and bars in the boulevard area. The traffic flow is projected underground. The nightclubs and pubs are specifically thought in order to contribute as a solution to the problem of high crime rate in nighttime.

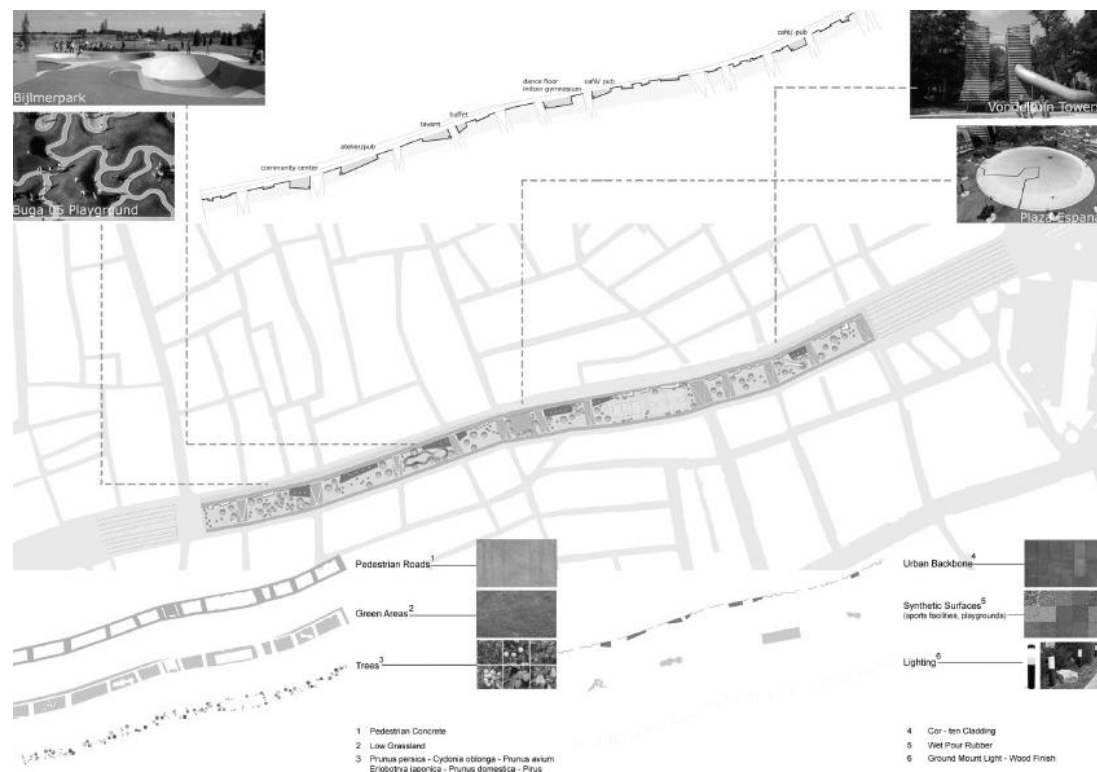


Figure 7: The Functions in the Projected Green Urban Corridor and the Mixed Use Zone

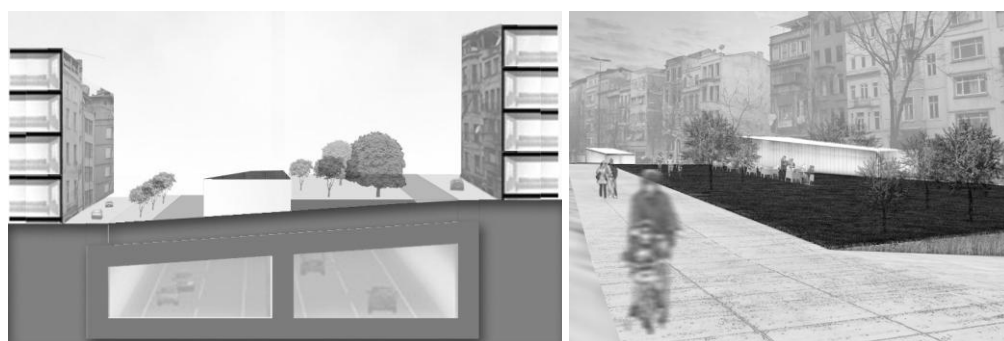


Figure 8: Some Images of the Project

4. Conclusion

For sure, an intervention like this urban design project should be supported with the reconditioning of the slum to change its general appearance and consequently people's prejudices. But more importantly, the social integration and rehabilitation projects should be the core of the change, because changing the physical environment will serve only as an effective contribution towards the paradigm shift of the society. And the real betterment will be experienced with the holistic approach.

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